

VZCZCXRO6102
PP RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK
DE RUEHDIR #0020/01 0951410
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P R 051410Z APR 07
FM IRAN RPO DUBAI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0087
INFO RUCNIRA/IRAN COLLECTIVE
RUEHDIR/IRAN RPO DUBAI 0080
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEFDHP/DIA DHP-1 WASHINGTON DC
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC
RUEHDE/AMCONSUL DUBAI 0082

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 IRAN RPO DUBAI 000020

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

BERLIN FOR PAETZOLD, LONDON FOR GAYLE, BAKU FOR HAUGEN,
PARIS FOR WALLER, BAGHDAD FOR GALBRAITH

E.O. 12958: DECL: 4/5/2017

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [IR](#) [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [SCUL](#) [KISL](#) [KIRF](#)

SUBJECT: RELIGIOSITY CONTINUES AMONG IRANIANS -- MODERN IRANIANS
PROGRESSIVE, BUT NOT SECULAR

RPO DUBAI 00000020 001.2 OF 003

CLASSIFIED BY: Jillian Burns, Director, IRPO, DOS.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Religiosity Continues Among Iranians -- Modern Iranians
Progressive, but not Secular

1.(C) Summary: In an unscientific survey of 10 Iranians regarding their attitudes toward religion seemed to indicate that, regardless of individual differences, they are connected to their religion. However, the degree to which they practice their religion differs. Several Iranian emigrants to the West seemed to be more secular than those still living in Iran and less tied to religious traditions. According to an Iranian academic, youth in Iran today follow religion more on account of tradition, but he claimed they are generally not deeply spiritual. He emphasized that Iranians have a high regard for education, which gives them a moderate religious identity, and that more educated people seem to have less trust in mosques. One Iranian businessman opined that Shiite Islam is more open to reform, inferring that in his view, Iran has potential for change and becoming a modern democracy. Contacts frequently assert that Iran will never become a secular society. Religion runs deep, despite the disillusion of many with clerical rule, and the disillusion of some clerics with velayat-e faqih. End summary.

Modern Tehranis connected to religion

2.(C) According to informal, separate discussions with some 10 different Iranian residents of Tehran passing through Dubai, Iranians consider religion important in life and are deep down religious. This group of relatively affluent professionals from Tehran included businessmen, a family of wealthy international jewelers, a UK-educated retired military nurse, a lawyer, a retired teacher, a publisher, a young lady photojournalist, and an academic/motivational speaker. While in no way a scientifically representative sample of the Iranian population, their views of religiosity in Iran are noteworthy.

3.(C) While some considered themselves Muslim first and others Iranian first, all of these interlocutors said they are religious and not secular. The nurse for example, surprised her accompanying Iranian-American friend when she said that even today in Iran, many people follow the mullahs, and that back in

the day, the public loved Ayatollah Khomeini. Several noted that religious practice in Iran is not forced, and that people follow religious traditions of their own volition. While they did not want religion to be part of all aspects of their everyday lives, they said that the majority of Iranians believe in a protector to save them. They all seemed respectful of other religions and of their non-Muslim countrymen, considering them harmless.

Religious participation sporadic

4.(C) According to the nurse, all Muslims observe important holidays like Ashura, Iran's most significant Islamic holiday. Many attend mourning rituals, she said, and cry from the bottoms of their hearts in commemoration of Imam Hussein's martyrdom 12 centuries ago. They claimed virtually every family observes the holy month of Moharam. (Note: The ninth and tenth days of Moharam are national holidays in remembrance of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein at the battle of Karbala, the grandson of Prophet Mohammad, son of Ali and his daughter Fatima. Endnote) Prominent families donate significant amounts of money and food to their mosques during this month. For example the Iranian jeweler family, an educated and modern business family with regular travels to the West, said they normally sponsors a group of about 2000 Imam Hussein mourners in Tehran. They slaughter about 100 cows and lambs, hire cooks and run kitchens to feed lunch and dinner to their devout group of men or "dasteh" for the first 13 days of Moharam. One Iranian, resident in Dubai, said her family in Dubai usually slaughters a cow for Moharam and gives the meat away to the poor. She explained that people believe disregarding Moharam is a bad omen that could bring misfortune. On the tenth day, dressed in black, the group proceeds to the streets of Tehran, and the police block roads for their processions. According to the Iranian religious scholar and several others, occasionally even non-Muslim Iranians like Armenians join the public grieving processions.

RPO DUBAI 00000020 002.2 OF 003

5.(C) On the other hand, the group indicated that not many Tehranis attend Friday prayer services and that many obligations, such as fasting or daily prayers, are largely ignored. They said that people in Tehran are busy. Furthermore, they said that regular prayers are not really a part of their culture. Of the two major Islamic holidays, Eid al-Fitr, the feast ending Ramadan fasting, is basically celebrated by those who observe fasting, and Eid al-Adha, the feast of sacrifice after pilgrimage to Mecca, is observed only by families of pilgrims.

Western emigrants less religious

6.(C) In contrast to the Tehranis, several Iranians who have been living in the West considered themselves Iranian before Muslim. While they may or may not be representative of Iranian expats in the West as a whole, this group focused more on overall spirituality than the practice of Islam. They asserted that Iranians abroad are probably among the least religious people who have emigrated from an Islamic country. They referred to the Shia rituals as ancient relics, superstitions, and said they are proud that Islamic customs are not practiced in their homes. In their view, their nation of Iran is held hostage by mullahs. One person from this group was going out drinking with his friends on the eve of Ashura.

7.(C) IRPO has not specifically examined religiosity among the Iranians in Dubai, but we think they fall in a broad range. The Iranian mosque in Dubai, on the eve of Ashura, was overflowing with young and old Iranians. The Iranian jeweler family, while held up for their visas in Dubai, catered food for the Iranian mosque in Dubai on this evening.

Religiosity versus spirituality

8.(C) An academic/motivational speaker who lives in Tehran asserted that although Iranians may appear religious in public, many have a superficial sense of religion. He complained that Iranians in general do not read much or think analytically. On the other hand, he said Iranians generally have a high regard for advanced education and advised the US to converse and consult with Iranian intellectuals. He claimed that the importance that Iranians put on education may account for the public's overall moderate religious identity and openness toward women's education; today about 60 percent of those entering college in Iran are women. He said that educated Iranians have less trust in mosques.

9.(C) The academic claimed that Iran is experiencing a cultural transition accompanied by greater social openness and a momentum towards change. People can do and say things they could not ten or fifteen years ago. Some mistrust the government, some look at Islam as tyranny, and overall there has been a drift away from strict Islam. He said there were only a small group of people left in Iran that maintained the fundamentalist religious fervor of the early days of the revolution, not counting government workers who are required to display a degree of religious devotion. He said that a new kind of religiosity has emerged in Iran, where people remain deeply religious but are anti-clerical and deeply suspicious of any privileges associated with the religious class. Young people are against that kind of Islam, he said, and some are not interested in the ritualistic form of Islam supported by the Iranian government. As an example of his assertion that clerics' involvement in politics had polluted their standing in society, he said that today turbaned and non-turbaned candidates have to plead in the same way for people's votes. According to the academic, mystical works by eastern and western authors are becoming popular in Iran.

Shia Islam: capacity to evolve

10.(C) According to the scholar, Iran's new generation of clerics is somewhat moderate and open. They often study religion from anthropological, legal, historical, and other standpoints, and the scholar opined that this interdisciplinary perspective may inspire interesting changes in the future. According to Iranian religious scholars, Shiites believe that divine law is not absolute, and that scholars with consent of a "faqih" or expert on Islamic jurisprudence, can always try to reach those principles which would be the decree of God, through the use of logic and reason. One of the Tehrani businessmen said he agreed

RPO DUBAI 00000020 003.2 OF 003

Shiite Islam is more open to the concept of "ijtihad" (which allows Islamic laws to be modified based on the needs of the times). Because of this, he believes Iran has a better chance than Sunni countries of becoming a modern democracy and perhaps a suitable future partner for the US. The steel businessman, a modern man with children studying in the West, considered himself a devout Muslim. He viewed Sunni Islam as more rigid, saying that generally the word of the Koran is accepted as law with no room for discussion, diversion, or votes on changing laws. In his view, the "miracle" of Khomeini was that he brought the seeds of democracy to Iran, allowing Iranian men and women to vote. He predicted that one day Iran could advance to a truly modern Islamic democracy. The concept of Islamic democracy, he said, is a frequent subject of discussion in Iran's religious seminaries or Hawzehs.

Comment: We frequently hear from contacts that whatever happens in Iran in the future, the society will remain a deeply religious one. We also hear that a significant number of Iranian clerics, including Grand Ayatollah Sanei do not like clerical involvement in the government and oppose the system of velayat-e faqih. (Note: Sanei, considered a reformist cleric, has called both nuclear weapons and suicide bombings un-Islamic. Endnote) These clerics prefer a model of their role in society more along the lines of the role that Grand Ayatollah Sistani

plays in Iraq. End comment
BURNS